

Presenting a Mystery Story That Grows More Mysterious at Every Step That Is Taken

THE STOLEN CRIME

BY
RICHARD CONNELL

"THEY caught that fellow who robbed the Bridge City Bank last night," announced Strang, editor of the Evening Tribune, as he came into the lounge of the Clintonian Club.

Two men, sunk deep in leather easy chairs before the log fire, looked up from an animated conversation.

"I thought they would," remarked Morton Yeager, the new district attorney of Valley county. He shot a glance at his companion, Simon Bain, cashier of the Clintonian Trust Company. "There you are, Bain," he said. "Excuse me if I explain loudly and vulgarly, I told you so."

Simon Bain blew smoke rings into the air and stretched his long legs.

"Wait a bit, Yeager, before you begin to cackle," he said. "Let's hear more about this. What's the man like, Strang?"

"An old-time yegg named Shanton, alias half a dozen other things," answered Strang. "Long criminal record. He was so obliging as to leave his hat behind when he fled. Also, his fingerprints all over the safe."

"Not a very intelligent sort of crook, one might say, eh?" asked Simon Bain, looking quizzically at the district attorney.

"Far from it," replied Strang. "Crude work. He said to Dace, our police reporter, 'I'm a has-been. These here thumb-prints and electric alarm and newfangled do-funnies are too much for us old-time birds.'"

"Exactly," exclaimed Simon Bain. "He's just the sort of man I thought did that clumsy job at Bridge City. Let's see his hat, did he?" Bain chuckled.

"I fall to see that that helps you, Bain," remarked Yeager. "In fact, it seems to me to support what I have been saying—a criminal always leaves clues."

"What's all this argument about, anyhow," demanded Strang, settling into a chair and lighting up an ancient calabash. The district attorney answered him.

"Bain, here, has been contending that it is possible to commit a perfect crime—a crime so executed that no evidence is left behind to convict the perpetrator."

"Huh," exclaimed Strang, "there are plenty of perfect crimes right here in Clintonia, then. At any rate, the police don't make arrests in a good many cases."

"There haven't been very many unsolved mysteries since I took office, you'll notice," returned Yeager. "No, Bain, there isn't a case where the criminal doesn't leave good, hot clues."

"Granted," said Bain. "Because criminals are a stupid, unsophisticated lot. Look at Shanton. He robs a safe and leaves his hat and thumb-prints. He uses enough nitro to blow up a courthouse, and rouses the whole town. Most crimes are committed by men like that, and planned with an equal amount of intelligence. Now, I believe that it is an educated man with scientific training turned criminal he could stage thefts or even murders that would baffle Sherlock Holmes himself. Just suppose, for example, a live, modern business man gave the same amount of intelligence and study to burglary as he did to his legitimate business?"

"You think, then," queried Strang, "that it is possible for your artist in crime to sit down with pencil and paper and plan out a theft so scientifically that it is policeproof?"

Simon Bain nodded.

"By careful study of the law of averages, our scientific criminal would reduce the chances against him to a negligible minimum," he replied. "He would provide against the most remote contingencies, and would so plan his campaign that he would be prepared to meet any emergency."

District Attorney Yeager smiled a wide smile of doubt.

"Tommyrot," he said. "It's easy to sit here and theorize about your pipe-fitter. But if you try to plan a specific crime for him, you'd soon find yourself up against all sorts of practical details."

Bain did not reply, and the three men sat listening to the crackling logs and puffing smoke rings into the air. Bain was staring at the fire, and the district attorney studied his alert, intense face, with the bright eyes of a dreamer, and the thin-tipped, competent mouth of the doer. The banker was the first to speak.

"I'll admit," he said presently, "that sometimes I have amused myself by planning crimes that my scientific criminal might execute. These mental exercises were purely academic, of course."

"Perhaps you can give us the blue print of one of them," suggested the district attorney.

Simon Bain thought a moment.

"I'll do it," he said. "And I'll give you real names and places, too."

He filled his pipe again, and sinking back into the deep chair began.

"As you know, the Pioneer Mills do their banking with the Clintonia Trust Company. It's no secret that their monthly pay roll is in excess of \$300,000. For the past nine years their method of getting the cash to meet the pay roll hasn't varied in the slightest degree. That is because Alec Rae, the cashier of the Pioneer Mills, is a precise, methodical man, very set in his ways."

"This is what happens. At 3 in the afternoon on the last day of every month Alec Rae comes to the side door of the Clintonia Trust Company, carrying an old black walrus bag. He always comes from the mills by trolley car. He wouldn't think of spending the money for a taxi to bring him to the bank."

"He knocks three times—never more, never less—and he is admitted. He comes into my office and says, in that nasal voice of his, 'Good day to you, Meester Bain, and I'll be having the cash for the Pioneer Mills, if you don't mind.'"

"I have a receipt ready, which he signs. The money is wrapped up in the cashier's cap in hundreds, fifties, tens, fives and ones. Alec Rae motions his thumb, signs at the sight of so much money and carefully counts the packages, holding them out from him to see, for he is near-sighted. He puts the cash into the black wal-

rus bag, looks it and goes out the side door and around to the front of the building to Market street, where he calls a taxi. He drives to the Pioneer Mills, where, I presume, he puts the money in the safe for the night. The whole process, from the time Alec Rae enters the bank till the time the money is in the safe at the Pioneer Mills, takes about an hour."

Bain paused. Yeager was leaning forward, listening intently. Strang was sprawled back in his chair, but he was not missing a word.

"Now," continued the banker, "the problem before our super-crook is to get that black walrus bag with the cash. I have doped out a plan he might follow; I think it would work. Here it is:

"Our super-crook comes to Clintonia and gets a job with the Pioneer Mills to study the habits of Alec Rae. He finds out in a few months just how Alec Rae gets the cash for the pay roll. Then, on the night before the last day in the month, he sneaks over to Bridge City or Avalon, steals a taxicab and drives it to Clintonia. That would be easy. Then he hides the taxi until the afternoon, and when Alec Rae comes out of the Clintonia Trust Company, about twenty minutes after 3, the man is waiting for him, and his black bag. Rae here takes the first taxi that comes along, so he'd get in."

"Our super-crook then heads his machine down Market street at a good pace and turns up Church street, headed for the Pioneer Mills. But he does not turn along Lincoln avenue. Instead, he shoots past the cemetery and on to the covered bridge across the Rushing river. This was a short cut to the mills, but recently the bridge has been condemned and there is no traffic on it at all. The whole thing would take less than fifteen seconds. In the center of the bridge, where it is dark on the brightest day, the thief would stop his car short. Alec Rae would stick his head out of the window to see what had happened and the thief would knock him unconscious with a blackjack."

"But isn't Rae armed?" asked Yeager.

"He's supposed to be," answered Simon Bain. "But our crook would find out that Rae broke his revolver two months ago and has been too peevish to buy a new one. He carries his old one, which does not work."

"Are you sure of that?" demanded Yeager.

"Positive," replied the banker. "Our crook would have an easy time silencing Alec Rae."

"But, even though Rae is near-sighted, he could, perhaps, see the man sufficiently well to identify him afterward," suggested the district attorney.

Bain smiled grimly.

"Our super-crook would take no chances," he said. "The Rushing river tells no tales. The unconscious man would be thrown from the bridge into the rapid. You know how seldom bodies are recovered from the Rushing river, and then they have been pounded to a pulp on the rocks. The thief and murderer would abandon the taxi and slip out of town with the black bag. There's your crime, Mr. District Attorney. How about it?"

The district attorney shrugged his shoulders.

"It's hard to tell," he admitted. "Of course, there are many snags your man might strike."

"It looks police-proof to me," said Strang, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "Some one ought to tell Rae about it. But him and his guard."

"Are you sure Rae's pistol doesn't work?" asked the district attorney.

"As I said, I'm positive," answered Bain.

"By Jove," exclaimed Strang, springing up. "It's 10 o'clock. I'm due home. Good night. The three men left the club and went their several ways."

THE next night two serious men sat at each other across a narrow table in a quiet corner of the Clintonian Club. There were Simon Bain, cashier of the Clintonia Trust Company, and Morton Yeager, the district attorney of Valley county.

"You know what I am going to say, Bain," said the district attorney in a low voice, "and how much I regret to say it."

"His eyes bored into those of the man at the table; the banker met the searching scrutiny with a smile. 'Well?' he said."

The district attorney leaned toward him.

"What did you do with the money, Bain?" he said.

The banker's answer was in the tone of one speaking with elaborate politeness and a petulant child.

"I tell you, Yeager, I did not take it," he said.

"I wish I might believe that," said Yeager. "But the evidence will not let me. And it is on the evidence that I, as a public official, must proceed. You know that, Bain."

"Yes, I know it," said the banker, without emotion. "And that is why I have not resented your absurd charge. I am waiting to hear that evidence, I assume that it must appear conclusive, otherwise you would not dare make such a charge against me."

"You shall hear the evidence, Bain. When you see how much I know, you'll also see that there is only one course open to you—confession."

"I'm listening," was all Bain said. "In the first place," said the district attorney, "in the presence of Strang and myself you outlined a plan of the crime that occurred to-day exactly as it was committed. Alec Rae called at your bank this morning and left with a bag containing \$125,000 in cash at eight minutes past three. He has not been seen since. Just before four an abandoned taxi was found on the lonely covered bridge over the Rushing river. There was blood on the seat inside and signs of a struggle. A button with a fragment of overcoat sticking to it and a shattered pair of spectacles were on the floor of the taxi. The button and spectacles have been identified absolutely as belonging to Alec Rae. It is exactly as you planned it, Bain, in this very club last night."

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cried Simon Bain, impatiently. "Do you think I'm an utter fool—to tell the district attorney of my plan to commit an unusual crime, and the next day commit it under his very nose?"

The district attorney shook his head.

"Come, come, Bain," he said, "you know as well as I do that would not be the act of a fool, but of a particularly clever man. It is a daring idea; it will be hard to make the ordinary lunk-headed jury comprehend just how clever you've been."

"Well," said Bain, keeping his composure, "you've got the same amount of evidence against Strang. He heard my plan, too."

"Strang can be eliminated," rejoined the district attorney. "Strang has a perfect alibi. Half a dozen reliable witnesses can swear that he was in the office of the Evening Tribune all afternoon. His second edition goes to press at 3:30. Besides, Strang has made a barrel of money out of the Tribune; he has no financial motive for robbing any one."

Bain made no reply.

"MOREOVER," Bain went on, "Yeager, a hasty investigation after the crime was discovered brought to light the fact that you have been playing the market, and your finances are in bad shape. There we have the motive."

Bain's eyes dropped.

"I'll admit," he said, slowly, "that I have extended myself a bit more than was prudent, lately, but I deny that my financial condition is serious. Have you any more evidence, Yeager?"

"Yes," said the district attorney. "I know that this afternoon between three and four you were not in your office in the bank. You left at half past two and did not return. Where were you about half past three, when Alec Rae was robbed and killed?"

"I was near the covered bridge over the Rushing river," Bain said. "Now you are being sensible."

"You are being sensible," cried Yeager, heartily. "Believe me, perfect frankness will pay."

"The straight story," said Bain, in that same even tone, "is that when I reached the covered bridge the crime had already been discovered by a passing workman."

The district attorney's face was stern again.

"Do you think a jury will believe that?" he asked.

"It's a fair question," he replied, "nevertheless," returned Bain, calmly.

The district attorney bent forward.

"And how do you account for the fact that you left your apartment last night at eleven and did not return till after two this morning?" Yeager demanded.

"The question has already been asked," he said. "I happened to be out of the city at the time you went out and the exact time you returned. A taxi was stolen last night in Bridge City. Bain had been seen at the scene of the crime that happened today. I remembered that you asked me twice if I was sure Alec Rae's revolver did not shoot. Why had you been so interested? Why were you in Bridge City at this hour in rough clothes, with a cap pulled over your eyes? Why had you tried to steal a taxi? I supposed you had fled in the middle of the attempt because you saw my figure in the doorway. I followed you."

Yeager sat like one spellbound.

"I followed you," went on Simon Bain, "along Shady road, around the cemetery, past the Pioneer Mills and onto the covered bridge over the Rushing river. On the bridge you stopped. With a pocket electric flashlight you made a careful examination of the interior of the old bridge. Then you turned the light upward and I heard you give a cry as if you'd seen the devil. The next second your light was out and you had dashed off the bridge and into the darkness. The moon had disappeared by this time and I could not follow you. So I went home. I had no doubt what was in your mind, and why you were examining the covered bridge. Like a prudent man, you were familiarizing yourself with the scene of your activities that afternoon."

"I don't see what good it will do," he said, "but I'll tell you. I have gone further than I should, as it is. I have put my case before you. By your own admissions that case is a strong one against you. This business has been painful enough, why prolong it?"

"Come, come, Yeager," protested Bain. "I have said all I can. Just one question, then? Surely, informal, you understand."

"Well, what is it?"

"Yeager, what were you doing on the covered bridge over the Rushing river at 2 o'clock this morning?"

The district attorney, who had partly risen and dropped back into his seat, Bain shot at him a second question:

"And what were you doing in Bridge City last night at midnight?" Yeager faced him defiantly.

"Me? On the covered bridge? In Bridge City? Last night? You're crazy," he cried.

"Don't try to bluff, Yeager," returned Bain. "I saw you there."

THE quiet conviction in the banker's tone told Yeager that it was useless to bluster. So the district attorney simply said, "Did you?" and waited.

"Yes," said Bain. "I saw you in two places. And now, since I've said all I can, let's get on with your case against me, you're going to listen to my case against you."

"You're case against me? What do you mean?" demanded Yeager.

"Listen," said Bain. "You, Yeager, were present last night when I outlined the plan of the crime that was committed today. You've eliminated Strang. That leaves you and me. I eliminate myself because I know that I did not do it. That leaves you, Yeager."

"Indeed?" said the district attorney.

"Yes," said the banker. "That leaves you. Motive, financial pressure. My bank marked two of your checks 'No funds' today. You've been living beyond your income. Your salary as district attorney is \$5,000 a year. On that you keep a car, a large house with four servants and a wife who is the only woman in Clintonia. It can't be done."

"I'm wasting time here," growled Yeager. But Bain continued.

"Last night when I left you at the club I went home, but I could not go to sleep. There were things I had to think out. If it is my custom when I have problems to solve to go for a long walk, so, as it was a fine moonlight night, I decided to walk over to Bridge City and to return by trolley car. I reached Bridge City about midnight. In this street I stopped to light a cigarette in a dark doorway a few doors below Jansen's all-night luncheon, where chauffeurs hang out. There were four taxicabs in front of Jansen's; their drivers were inside the luncheon

room. I walked down the sidewalk, past the Pioneer Mills and onto the covered bridge over the Rushing river. On the bridge you stopped. With a pocket electric flashlight you made a careful examination of the interior of the old bridge. Then you turned the light upward and I heard you give a cry as if you'd seen the devil. The next second your light was out and you had dashed off the bridge and into the darkness. The moon had disappeared by this time and I could not follow you. So I went home. I had no doubt what was in your mind, and why you were examining the covered bridge. Like a prudent man, you were familiarizing yourself with the scene of your activities that afternoon."

"I saw four taxicabs outside Jansen's, as you know. I got into one. Then something stronger than I was held my hand. You may call it cold feet, or prudence, or conscience, or whatever you like. But in that minute I sat in the seat of that taxi, I lived a dozen years. I saw what it means to have a clean record; I understood as I never understood before that honesty is more than the best policy; it is the only policy. I've been living straight for forty-two years. I am a law-abiding citizen. I intend to keep it that way. I intend to keep it in my own garage until I need it, for who would suspect the district attorney?"

BAIN, with intense interest, was following the earnest words of the district attorney.

"Then why did you go to the covered bridge with your flashlight and ran as if you were afraid?"

The district attorney flushed.

"Well, I had a thought," Yeager replied. "Once I was a safe distance from the taxi, I relapsed to my financial troubles again, and something kept whispering to me that I was a weakling to funk now. My mind, you see, refused to give up the miserable idea. I kept seeing that black bag with the three hundred thousand dollars in cold cash. I thought of what the money would mean to me. I screwed up my nerve and resolved to make another go at it."

"And then?" came from Bain.

"I decided that the taxi could wait. I'd look over the covered bridge, and return later for the taxi. I reached the old bridge and with my pocket flashlight, which is almost worn out, I examined the rotten planking, and saw the holes through which a man's body could be slipped into the roaring rapids thirty feet below. The sight of those holes unnerved me. The job meant more than robbery. It meant murder. Murder of innocent Alec Rae. I thought of Rae's face, as

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ver-plated pocket flashlight. It bore the initials 'M. Y.'"

"Yours, I think," said the banker. "Yes," said the district attorney, his voice broken and bewildered. "It's mine."

"Then," cried the banker, "I charge you with the theft of the Pioneer Mills pay roll, and the murder of Alec Rae."

The district attorney did not meet the banker's eye. He sat silent. Then he looked up and in a low voice said: "Bain, I'm guilty—but my guilt is not the sort that a jury of twelve men can punish."

"We'll see," said the banker, grimly. "You're not really guilty of robbing and killing Rae," insisted the district attorney. "I did not actually strike him down and take the black bag. But I planned to do it, and in my mind I did it."

"Yes, when I reached home after our talk at the club, I went over my accounts and found them in worse shape even than I had thought. I was desperate, and it was night. A hellish suggestion came into my brain; I thought of your police-proof crime, and the three hundred thousand dollars in the black bag. The more I thought of it, sitting there alone in my room with the wreck of my career about me, the more sure I grew I could rob Rae and get away without leaving evidence. I did not think of killing him. I tried to fight off the idea; but it held me with a horrible fascination. I cursed you for putting such a thought into my head."

"At last, I walked over to Bridge City to take the first dishonest step of my life: I was going to steal the necessary taxi. I intended to keep it in my own garage until I needed it, for who would suspect the district attorney?"

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it would look after I hit him—pale, weak, with his staring green eyes behind his thick glasses. And then, Bain, I looked up and I saw the face of Alec Rae floating in mid-air in the center of the bridge!"

"Yeager, are you mad?"

"I was never sadder in my life, Bain. I saw that pale face and those green eyes behind thick glasses as plainly as I see you this minute. But there was no body. The head was suspended in space about ten or more feet from the ground. My nerves had been under a terrible strain all night, and they snapped then. I dropped my flashlight and ran as if fiends were after me. I reached my home exhausted. Today I was in no shape for work; I wanted to get away from Clintonia. I wanted to forget about Alec Rae and the black bag. He'd tempted me enough. So this afternoon I went on a long walk in the country, toward Avalon, and was five miles away from the covered bridge when Rae was killed. When I got back, it was after four and I was informed of Rae's death. My duty as district attorney was plain. I must secure the conviction of the murderer. Every scrap of evidence I could collect pointed at you, Bain."

"Then it was not you, Yeager, who sent me that fake telephone message this morning?" asked Bain, his brow knit in a puzzled frown.

"Then who sent the message?"

"Can you prove that it was received?"

"Yes," said Bain. "Dillon, the paying teller, took it for me. Can you prove you did not send it, Yeager?"

"I can. I can prove that I was asleep in my home till after 11."

"Then," cried Bain, "if you are playing as fair with me as I am with you, there is something weird and terrible in this business, Yeager. Some one has stolen my crime."

"Some one? But who?"

"I think I can tell you," answered a third voice. Looking up they saw the big frame of Editor Strang.

The editor laughed a short laugh.

"Oh, no, I'm not guilty," he said. "In a way I'm culpable, but I'm not guilty."

"Culpable, but not guilty? What do you mean?" the district attorney asked.

"I'm afraid I'm the one who made it possible for Alec Rae to steal my crime," said Strang. "After I left you at the club I called up Alec Rae and told him about your plan for the crime. I thought to put him on his guard. Poor, greedy little devil—"

"But Rae is dead—"

"He is not," said the editor. "He's under arrest in New York City."

"Rae alive?"

"Naturally. He was arrested half an hour ago aboard the steamer Juanita Ceballos, due to sail tomorrow morning at daybreak for Yucatan. The detectives searched out-bound steamers at my suggestion."

THE editor pulled out his prehensile calabash, stoked it up, lit it and sent up a cloud of smoke.

"But what gave you the idea it was Rae?" asked the district attorney.

"Common sense and elimination. I knew I didn't do it. I didn't think either of you would be fool enough to turn crook. That left Alec Rae, I never did like his pasty face and his sly ways, anyhow. I decided it was he who had stolen your crime, Bain, after I had handed it to him on a silver platter. But how to prove it? Rae played the game cleverly. The bloodstains in the taxi were real blood. The button from his coat told nothing. That left the glasses. And it was that shattered pair of spectacles in the taxi that betrayed him."

"By the merest chance," the editor answered. "It only goes to show that even perfect crimes planned by efficient business men have pinholes in them somewhere." He bowed ironically toward Bain.

"Tell us, man; tell us!" exclaimed Bain.

"It was a wild hunch," said the editor. "Rae always wore unusually thick glasses for his near-sightedness. They were made for him by Baldwin, the optician. Baldwin identified the shattered spectacles found in the taxi as belonging to Rae. He said he could tell by the uncommonly thick lenses, the extremely narrow bridge and the cheap, heavy metal frame Rae always insisted on having. The police let it go as a hunch. Then I remembered that Rae had been getting more and more near-sighted for the past six or eight years. So I had Baldwin prepare the shattered lenses of glasses and left them in the taxi because he was too miserly to ruin a new pair. Even with a fortune in his grasp, his tight nature got the better of his generosity, and he left behind him a clue which will send him away for a good many years, I think."

"The banker and the district attorney had slumped nervelessly in their chairs."

"As little a thing as that," muttered Yeager, half to himself. "As little a thing as that?"

"Yes," said the editor. "I don't think any of us, smart as we may be, would have thought that so small a thing could betray us. Well, I must go; we're getting out an extra about Rae's arrest." He hurried away.

"Well, Bain," remarked the district attorney, "all we can do is say we're sorry and call it quits. It's a lesson to me.